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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MINSK 000183

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [BO](#)

SUBJECT: FRUSTATED MILINKEVICH SUPPORTERS SAY, &JUST LEAD,
WE WILL FOLLOW8

REF: A. MINSK 177

[B](#). MINSK 162

[C](#). MINSK 163

Classified By: Ambassador Karen Stewart for reason 1.4 (d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) De facto opposition coalition leader Milinkevich's supporters say that the former presidential candidate has tremendous potential as the head of a broad opposition movement. However, his support base, which is made up of civil society groups and sympathetic opposition party activists in Minsk and the regions, express frustration that he is doing everything but leading. They point to his recent efforts to undermine the opposition coalition and his weak attempts to develop his "For Freedom" movement. With the exception of a few marginal players, pro-Milinkevich activists encourage the coalition leader to seek a compromise with opposition party leaders on the upcoming democratic congress and other divisive issues. If Milinkevich still meets resistance, then and only then should he focus on the "For Freedom" movement. Regardless, his supporters are correctly warning Milinkevich that he needs to stop playing the role of spoiler and do something (anything) constructive: he needs to lead. End Summary.

Milinkevich's Support Base Relatively Strong

[1](#)2. (C) For the past few weeks we have held several meetings with de facto coalition leader Aleksandr Milinkevich's current support base -- i.e., pro-democracy NGOs and sympathetic opposition party activists in Minsk and the regions (refs A and B). These organizations include: civil advocacy NGOs (e.g. Assembly of Belarusian Democratic NGOs), human rights groups (e.g. Charter 97 and Vyasna), youth groups (e.g. Malady Front and the youth group formerly known as Zubr), politically active Protestant churches (e.g. New Life Church), opposition coalition activists in the regions, and key Minsk-based members of the Belarusian National Front (BNF) and United Civic Party (UCP). The degree of support for Milinkevich from these groups and people varies, but generally speaking, these organizations would be willing to follow Milinkevich, if only the de facto coalition leader were willing to rise up to the challenge.

"Milinkevich Has Great Leadership Potential..."

[1](#)4. (C) When the October 2005 democratic congress elected Milinkevich its candidate for the March 2006 presidential

elections, most observers thought he was the best choice of the lot but few had high expectations for the soft-spoken, relatively unknown NGO leader. Milinkevich's surprisingly strong performance as a candidate and consensus-builder -- including his decision to select Belarusian Party of Communists (BPC) leader Sergey Kalyakin as campaign manager and UCP leader Anatoliy Lebedko as head of his shadow government -- broadened support among opposition parties and deepened his support in civil society. Milinkevich supporters point out his key strengths:

-- Solid Name Recognition in Belarus: Viktor Korniyenko, a civil society activist and one of Milinkevich's closest allies in the coalition, told Pol/Econ Chief on February 28 that Milinkevich currently "enjoys" a 10 percent popular support rating in independent polling, compared to the opposition leaders' 0.1 to two percent ratings (and Lukashenko's 55 percent). Malady Front leaders Sergey Bakhun and Siarhei Lisichonak said they continue to be surprised with how many "simple, ordinary" Belarusians recognize Milinkevich in train stations, on the streets, and in large and small cities throughout Belarus. (Comment: Foreign TV media coverage of Milinkevich, particularly during the presidential elections and his subsequent high-level trips to European capitals, significantly contributes to Milinkevich's unquestionable name recognition in Belarus. End comment.)

-- Access to Senior U.S. and European Leadership: Civil society leaders and opposition party activists note that Milinkevich's access to heads of state and ranking government officials in Western capitals is a precious asset that other opposition leaders clearly lack (and envy). Such access provides the fragile and embattled democratic opposition with needed political support, as well as financial support.

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Milinkevich informed us several months ago his high-level meetings in Norway led to a commitment by Oslo of USD 1 million for the opposition.

-- Strong Support in the Regions: BNF deputy chair Viktor Ivashkevich and UCP deputy head Lyudmila Gryaznova separately confirmed for Pol/Econ Chief that the opposition coalitions in the regions strongly identify with Milinkevich and are demanding that their national party leaders ensure Milinkevich's participation in the upcoming congress and the coalition. Belarusian Social Democratic Party (BSDP) "Gramada" acting chairman Anotoliy Levkovich (in place of imprisoned leader Aleskandr Kozulin) agreed with the assessment of Ivashkevich and Gryaznova, but he stressed that the left-leaning party activists in the regional coalitions are ultimately loyal to their parties, not to Milinkevich or even the coalition. Assembly of Belarusian Democratic NGOs Executive Director Alyona Volynets suggested that Milinkevich's strong support in the regions puts him in an excellent position to spark a genuine grassroots democratic movement in Belarus.

"...But He's Not Acting Like A Leader"

15. (C) Despite Milinkevich's strengths, even his most loyal supporters continue to express deep frustration with his behavior and performance since the March 2006 presidential elections. The following are the most serious complaints about Milinkevich among civil society leaders and sympathetic party activists.

-- Unchecked Egotism: Nearly all of Milinkevich's supporters say that he has fallen into the same trap as the other opposition coalition leaders -- the insatiable thirst for power. Korniyenko characterized Milinkevich's behavior since the 2006 presidential elections as "worrisome," explaining that if Milinkevich continues down the road of "me first," he will quickly fade away into political oblivion. Although most of his supporters do not support a congress that would

only strip Milinkevich of his leadership position, they encourage him to reach a compromise with the other coalition leaders.

BNF recently presented to Milinkevich and the party leaders a proposal that, among other things, virtually secures Milinkevich's position as leader and creates an "executive director" position that would be shared (on a rotating basis) among the party leaders. Most of Milinkevich's supporters agree that the BNF proposal is fair to both sides, but they question whether Milinkevich is humble enough to reach the same conclusion. (Note: Apparently, Milinkevich has given his blessing to the BNF proposal, but he has yet to publicize that and he is known for endlessly changing his position. End note.)

-- Indecisive and Reckless Decision-Making: Most Milinkevich supporters maintain that Milinkevich's close association with Charter 97 leaders Dmitriy Bondarenko and Andrey Sannikov fuels his increasingly egotistical and erratic tendencies (ref C). Civil society leaders and party activists uniformly fault Milinkevich for heeding counsel from two activists that represent "only a handful of people" and show no interest in cooperating with opposition parties or other NGOs. Milinkevich has made a number of scathing remarks against the coalition and opposition party leaders, and many attribute his strong words to "bad advice from marginal players." Thus, instead of actively seeking a compromise with party leaders on any given issue, Milinkevich has only exacerbated tensions in the broader democratic movement.

Bondarenko, in his defense, recently claimed to Pol/Econ Chief that Milinkevich is withdrawing from the coalition only because he realized that it is an "ineffectual collection of feckless individuals." However, even Bondarenko criticized Milinkevich for his erratic behavior with Charter 97. Sannikov recently told DCM that he also does not understand why Milinkevich occasionally "obsesses over" improbable developments, such as Lukashenko ceding Belarusian sovereignty to Russia in a Union State or Kalyakin turning the coalition into a pawn of the Kremlin. Clearly, Milinkevich's proclivity to follow the advice of the last person he meets with undermines his ability to lead the coalition or any movement.

-- Too Much Talk, Not Enough Action: Milinkevich sympathizers are also deeply disappointed with his inability to define and push forward his "For Freedom" campaign.

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Volynets said that Milinkevich had several scheduled meetings with activists in the Assembly of Belarusian Democratic NGOs to explain the key components of his movement, but at the last minute he cancelled the meetings, citing scheduling conflicts or health problems. Bakhun of Malady Front noted that in October 2006 he sent to Milinkevich concrete proposals for his movement, but the de facto coalition leader has yet to respond to the suggestions. Milinkevich privately told Korniyenko that the March 25 demonstration in celebration of Belarus' first brief period of independence represents the launch pad of his movement, but Korniyenko doubted the movement would ever get off the ground if an insignificant number of activists (less than 10,000) showed up for the demonstration.

Comment: Milinkevich Should View Congress As An Opportunity

16. (C) A broad and united democratic opposition is the cornerstone of an effective campaign to seek democratic change in Belarus, and most of Milinkevich's supporters recognize this fact. A democratic congress, whether it is held in March or later this year, represents an excellent opportunity for Milinkevich to demonstrate his willingness to be a team player. His closest ally in the coalition, BNF leader Vyachorka, handed him this opportunity on a silver

platter when he proposed that Milinkevich would remain the leading face of the opposition while sharing leadership responsibilities with the other coalition leaders. Although Korniyenko has told us -- not in itself a guarantee that a firm decision has been made -- that Milinkevich has accepted Vyachorka's offer, Milinkevich has yet to make his views public.

17. (C) Coalition leaders Lebedko and Kalyakin may resist Vyachorka's proposal. Kalyakin, in particular, speaks with excessive confidence about the inevitability of the congress going forward; Lebedko is more realistic but has not enthusiastically embraced Vyachorka's proposal. However, Milinkevich's unequivocal public endorsement of Vyachorka's proposal would demonstrate the de facto coalition leader's ability to compromise and it could force Kalyakin and Lebedko back to the negotiating table (or risk criticism from within their own parties). Many of his supporters say -- and we agree -- that if Milinkevich's agreement to Vyachorka's proposal is rejected by the coalition leaders, he would then have the moral and political authority to force on the "For Freedom" campaign instead.
Stewart